

Why the Church killed Christ

Clay Nelson © 15 May 2016

One of the paradoxes Unitarians live with is our acceptance of people of all faith perspectives including those who claim none while maintaining a deep suspicion of the faith that gave birth to Unitarianism—Christianity. The reasons are understandable. Most Unitarians didn't start life as Unitarians. They are mostly refugees from the dominant faith in western culture—Christianity. They were drawn here to escape what they experienced as toxic, such as being judged and condemned as sinful for just being who they are.

Some come here because they found Christianity similar to Wonderland where like Alice they were told to believe impossible things:

“There's no use trying,” Alice said. “One can't believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven't had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

Others have come simply because they have found Christianity to be irrelevant and useless in this post-modern world. New Zealand Anglicans seemed determined to make that point this week when they voted down a proposal to bless same-sex marriages AFTER they have been performed. Allowing priests to conduct same-sex marriages isn't even being debated yet. It's ironic. As an Anglican priest I can bless everyone and everything else, even warships. As a Unitarian minister I'm not asked to bless people or things but I can officiate at a same-sex marriage. It's kind of a schizophrenic existence I lead—a very conflicted one.

While I am sympathetic to the reasons behind Unitarian suspicions of Christianity, I am still drawn to Jesus as my spiritual talisman, my taonga if you will, and so I am unwilling to remain silent as the church continues to kill Christ to silence Jesus.

What is the difference between Jesus and Christ? Jesus is a historical person who died. Christ is a theological concept that is eternal. It means to be anointed. It was Jesus' followers who anointed him as the Son of God. Before his death, there was no Christ. For about a thousand years Christ was a metaphor for the spiritual power people basked in from following Jesus. I will get in to how and why that changed in a bit.

For me Jesus is a parable for what it means to be fully alive. When one reads between the lines of the gospels (the only way to read them, in my opinion) you discover how people experienced knowing him. He was obviously someone special. They expressed this by telling stories about the unusual circumstances of his conception (which seemed perfectly plausible to them, as they had heard of many such conceptions). They told of miracles he performed (again plausible in their world view). They told of his breaking religious rules to make whole those on the margins of their society. They marvelled that he liked a good party with an inclusive guest list. They remembered the bits of wisdom he would drop into conversations over a glass of wine. They puzzled over his after-dinner stories that turned their idea of reality topsy-

turvy...Have you heard the one about the GOOD Samaritan? Even more puzzling was why he didn't meet the power of Rome with his own power? The people would have risen up with just a word from him. Why did he forgive those who hated him? How could he show love to non-Jews, even Roman centurions? He was clearly a force of nature. After his death he remained present in the memories of his followers, inspiring them to live lives counter-intuitive in the prevailing culture.

As my talisman he is a reminder to be not afraid of death, to speak truth to power, to love even those whose actions and words I despise and revile, to live humbly with humour and gratitude and grace, to live as one with all creation, to understand that divinity resides within me and to let it breathe and act to make the world more just, kind and compassionate by being more just, kind and compassionate.

This Jesus is not sweet and mild. This Jesus is dangerous. That's why religious authorities condemned him and Roman authority executed him. He was subverting an oppressive system that existed solely for the elite's benefit. They thought he was done and dusted, but not so.

In the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of aphorisms that scholars believe are authentic to Jesus, Jesus proclaims that the kingdom or reign of God is within you. This was not some heavenly paradise attainable only by the righteous after they died. This was a paradise available here and now to everyone. Jesus was affirming life in this world as the place of salvation. His early followers, mostly peasants living under heavy handed Roman rule and taxation, found a way of living together in paradise in spite of the oppression that was meant to crush them thanks to their memories of Jesus.

I learned more about this earlier understanding of paradise because I was recently asked in our adult religious education why Christians use the cross, an instrument of execution, as their symbol. I knew that a fish was the earliest symbol Christians used to identify themselves. I knew that Christian art had taken quite awhile to put Jesus on the cross, but I wanted to know more about the when and why. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, the former president of Starr King Unitarian Seminary, answered my questions in their fascinating book, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*.

Both women being biblical scholars had the same questions I did but were more adventuresome than I in seeking answers. They travelled throughout Europe and the Middle East to ancient Christian sites looking for when Jesus was crucified in art. They began their journey in the catacombs in Rome. They found lots of images of Jesus: Jesus being baptised, Jesus resurrecting Lazarus, Jesus carrying a lamb, Jesus as a child. What they could not find was a dead Jesus, not even one. They observed "It was just as the angel had said to the women looking for Jesus at his tomb, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead. He is not here.' He most certainly was not," they concluded.

He was not at any of the other sites they would explore either. What would astound them was that it took Jesus a thousand years to die. Images of his corpse did not appear in churches until the 10th century. That discovery just led to more questions. What was the focus of theological art prior to images of his death? Why did it change?

They focused on art because in a pre-literate world art was like a good book. It told a story. It had a message. It inspired. To look at early Christian art was to learn not only what Jesus' earliest followers believed but why they followed him.

What they found is early Christian art was about living in paradise. As they examined early church interiors they found that they sought to capture dimensions of paradise that "placed Christians in a lush visual environment: a cosmos of stars in midnight skies, golden sunlight, sparkling waters teeming with fish, exuberant fauna and verdant meadows filled with flowers and fruit trees."

09

Initially they were both disconcerted and intrigued to think that early Christians appeared to be obsessed with the afterlife. They studied ancient liturgies and to their delight discovered that Christian paradise had been something other than heaven or the afterlife. We tend to think of paradise as a world after death, but in the early church, paradise was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God. It was on the earth. "The images filled the walls of spaces in which liturgies fostered aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experiences of life in the present, in a world created as good and delightful."

This understanding affirmed life in this world as the place of salvation. Within their church communities Christians sought to help life flourish in the face of imperial power, violence and death. Although often persecuted, they refused to be driven out of paradise. Even in the 4th century when Constantine made Christianity the religion of Rome and tried to impose uniformity of belief on them they were not driven out. When church teachers shifted gender ideas to favour patriarchy and created a deeply fractured relationship to Judaism they did not lose sight of paradise. Their failures were not a sign to them of paradise lost, but a sign of their failure to live ethically in it.

"They struggled to stay grounded in love, in justice, in nonviolence, in wisdom, and in freedom, to live together as humanity in the garden of God." They did not idealise themselves or the world. They saw the reality that life is "a struggle to gain wisdom and to live ethically and responsibly toward others, so that love might flourish in their communities and so that they might live in paradise together."

But eventually paradise was lost. Brock and Parker did not find their first corpse of Jesus until they left the Mediterranean world. They found it in the forests of the far north of Europe. Saxon artists carved the first crucifixions—life size, three-dimensional wooden figures—in the 10th century. A hundred years earlier their ancestors had been forced by Charlemagne's soldiers to be baptised at sword point. They had already been Christian at that time but it was Christianity coloured by their ancient pagan beliefs. But that wasn't the real issue for the empire. They had repeatedly resisted being ruled by the Holy Roman Emperor. Baptism was a humiliating means of forcing them to submit to imperial rule. So for them, the paradise they had lived in was blotted out by a form of Christianity accompanied by violence and death. Portraying a dead Jesus was a subversive act by an oppressed people. They were the people on the cross; crucified by the new Rome using the guise of Jesus to destroy, not give new life.

The irony was lost on an imperial church. It was in the interest of those lusting for power and conquest to convince the faithful they were sinful people beyond redemption. This is when the idea that Jesus had to die on the cross to save us from our sins first began to be expressed. Portraying a dead Christ in worship space helped to instil guilt for causing his death in a people who once lived joyful lives in paradise. It led to transforming communion from a heavenly feast shared with all in a loving community to eating the corpse of Jesus. But only those who were in a state of grace should eat of it. Fewer and fewer participated, fearing their sins were not forgiven. Penance became an instrument for dominating the faithful. Essentially, an imperial church claimed heaven and made it hell. They reduced paradise from being the whole world to being the size of the church sanctuary. Doing so cemented its power.

But having power does not necessarily control hearts and minds. One of the biggest challenges the empire faced was overcoming the faithful's resistance to violence and killing. Soldiers feared for their souls should they die in battle before being able to be forgiven by a priest for shedding blood.

In 1095 Pope Urban the Second found a way around this. Europe was being torn apart by feudal violence. He called for the first Crusade to the Holy Land to divert the warring factions and unite them against a common enemy, the Saracens—the Moslems that controlled Jerusalem. Relying on the passage in John's gospel found on so many of New Zealand's war memorials, in and outside of churches, "Greater love has no one than this, that one should lay down their life for a friend." (15:13), Urban sought to sanctify war. He declared war was not only just, it was holy—it was a pilgrimage that served God and showed love for one's kin. Crusaders who killed Jews and Muslims earned forgiveness for all their sins and were assured of a place in paradise AFTER death, not after baptism. Paradise was postponed and made a reward for killing. The subversive, life-altering, nonviolent, loving Christ the early church had followed was now as dead as the human Jesus. Trading love for empire would transform Christianity into something Jesus' disciples wouldn't have recognised. It became an instrument of destruction, responsible for terrible crimes against humanity. Thanks to empire we were now the ones on the cross.

But some Christians have not given up hope, even after a millennium, of returning to paradise. In the previous two centuries some reformers have sought to reclaim the value of life in this world and salvation on earth, as it is in heaven. Some 19th century thinkers, such as Unitarians Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, returned humanity to an appreciation of nature and individual spiritual development. Their reclaiming the goodness of this world challenged the medieval idea that Jesus' death saved the world. They exposed the narrow, self-centred piety of personal sin and salvation and involved themselves in the struggle against systemic sins, calling for the abolition of slavery and women's suffrage. They argued that socially organised sin was a far greater evil than personal sins; then they set to work to create justice for the poor, imprisoned, and oppressed.

Paradise in this world is not yet regained but at least now we know what we are seeking. And we don't have to be Christian to seek the world Jesus envisioned—a beloved community of all humanity living in peace with each other and our earthly home. In fact, it might be easier for us as Unitarians to get to paradise. We don't have to carry a thousand years of baggage and a cross to get there.